West Central Region Fishing Forecast

Mississippi River (Grant, Crawford, Vernon, & La Crosse counties)
Walleye populations remain high in Mississippi River Pool 9 near Genoa and Pool 10 near Prairie du Chien. In 2004, a bag limit of six fish in total went into effect to standardize regulations in the boundary waters between Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa. In 2005, DNR fall electrofishing surveys continued to show that this naturally reproducing system is very productive. Catch-per-unit-effort (CPE) for adult walleye in Pool 9 was up from 2003 to 240 fish per hour with the majority of fish 11 to 28 inches. In Pool 10, CPE for adult walleye was also higher to 120 fish per hour with the majority of fish between 11 and 25 inches.

Young-of-year (YOY) surveys also indicated that a good year-class of walleye was produced. In Pool 8, CPE for YOY walleye was 207 fish per hour, above the pool's long-term average of 119 walleye per hour. In Pool 10, CPE was 54 walleye per hour, down slightly from the long-term average. In all, we expect 2006 will provide many opportunities to catch good numbers of fish for walleye anglers.

Over the past century, the Mississippi River has dramatically changed due to manmade disturbances including construction in the 1930s of a series of locks and dams to regulate water levels to allow passage for barges and other watercraft. Since their construction, many island complexes and backwater lakes in the lower portion of each pool have filled in or eroded away due to high water levels. The loss of these backwater lake complexes, which are critical over-wintering habitat for fish species like bluegill, crappie, and largemouth bass, can hurt these fish populations.

Two habitat rehabilitation and enhancement projects recently completed near Ambro Slough in Pool 10 and Sunfish Lake in Pool 1l have greatly improved available overwintering habitat for many fish species in these areas. Electrofishing surveys conducted in Tilmont, Big Missouri, Spring, and Upper Doubles lakes (Pool 10) and Sunfish Lake (Pool 11) showed good populations of black and white crappie 9 to 13 inches, bluegill 5 to 9 inches, yellow perch 6 to 12 inches, and largemouth bass 10 to 19 inches. These efforts to enhance and rehabilitate degraded backwater areas in the Mississippi River will ultimately provide year-round fishing opportunities for generations of anglers to come. - *Patrick Short, fisheries biologist, Prairie du Chien*

Marathon County

Lake Wausau
In 2002 a new regulation went into effect on the Wisconsin River from Grandfather Dam near Merrill to the Prairie du Sac Dam: the minimum size for walleye is 15 inches, no fish may be kept between 20 and 28 inches, and only one fish 28 inches or greater may be kept. Lake Wausau is the first large reservoir in a series that fall under this regulation. It is a 1,918 acre reservoir formed behind the Rothschild Dam. The lake has a maximum depth of 30 feet, with much of it shallow and vegetated outside of the river channel. We surveyed Lake Wausau in 2005 and compared it to the 1995 survey before the new

regulation was in place. We found that the proportional stock density of walleye increased from 35 percent to 70 percent and numbers of fish greater than 20 inches increased by 40 percent. Net catch increased from 0.6 fish per net night in 1995 to 1.4 net night in 2005. The net catch was composed of mostly larger fish and anglers will likely notice an increase in their catch of fish 20 inches or greater. We also noted a 10 percent decrease in annual mortality which was likely due to reduced angler harvest of fish greater than 20 inches. Another positive was the capture of five walleye 27 to 29 inches long, compared to only two captured in this range in 1995. Feedback has been mixed from anglers, but most like the new regulation.

Spring fyke netting was conducted in 2005 on Lake Wausau and the results were comparable or better than the 1995 survey. Walleye catch per unit effort (fish per net night) increased from 0.6 in 1995 to 1.4 in 2005. Much of this increase was due to an increased catch of fish 20 inches and larger. The northern pike population is better than ever. Even though catch decreased slightly, the proportional stock density has increased from 33 percent to 78 percent indicating a larger percentage of fish over 21 inches than in 1995. Another important change has been the increase in the number of musky: the catch increased from 0.02 to 0.11 fish per net night, with fish ranging in size from 9.2 to 46 inches. Largemouth and smallmouth bass numbers are stable, as are panfish. Black crappie stock density has remained about the same for fish 8 inches or greater, but the maximum size captured increased from 10.8 inches to 13.4 inches. Density of bluegill 6 inches or greater has decreased slightly from 83 percent to 66 percent, but the catch was strong and the maximum size has remained about the same at 8.9 inches versus a maximum of 9.6 in 1995. In addition, anglers report regularly catching channel catfish of various sizes. Lake Wausau has an impressive fishery and the species variety to please any angler.

Lake DuBay

We surveyed the DuBay Flowage in 2003, a 6,700-acre lake that is the 14th largest body of water in Wisconsin. We estimated 1 walleye per acre 15 inches or greater, compared to the nearby Big Eau Pleine Flowage, which produced 0.8 fish per acre greater than 15 inches. We captured 157 smallmouth bass; 99 percent of the fish sampled were greater than 11 inches and about 36 percent were 14 inches or greater. Northern pike were a major component of the catch, with 40 percent of those sampled 21 inches or greater. About 15 percent were 26 inches or greater and 4 percent were 32 inches or larger. This compares favorably to the Big Eau Pleine Flowage in 2003 where 3 percent of the pike were 32 inches or greater. The largest pike collected was 44.5 inches and the flowage appears to have outstanding growth potential. The panfish populations were excellent: 67 percent of bluegill were 6 inches or greater with an average size of 7 inches; 69 percent of black crappie were 8 inches or greater and averaged 10 inches; and 40 percent of yellow perch were 8 inches or greater and averaged 8 inches. Overall, our length summaries for panfish indicate that angler catches in the size ranges anglers prefer should remain good in 2006: 15 percent of bluegill were 8 inches or greater, 12 percent of black crappie were 12 inches or greater, and 7 percent of yellow perch were 10 inches or greater.

Wisconsin River
We surveyed the river using electrofishing gear at five locations in 2005. Smallmouth bass was the most common species captured and comprised 67 percent of the catch from the combined sites. The highest catch occurred below the Stevens Point Dam where a rate of 60 fish per hour was observed, followed by catches below DuBay Dam (42 per hour), below Rothschild Dam (29 per hour), below Whiting Dam (13.7 per hour), and at Brokaw (7.5 per hour). Smallmouth ranged from 4 to 18.1 inches and averaged 11.2 inches.

Channel catfish were second in abundance at 13 percent of the total catch, with the greatest catch below Stevens Point Dam, below Rothschild Dam, and below DuBay Dam, respectively. A channel catfish hoop net study completed in summer 2005 also indicated the greatest abundance below Stevens Point Dam (54 fish per net night), below Whiting (44 fish per net night), and below DuBay (2.2 per net night), respectively. The largest catfish were captured below DuBay Dam and ranged from 14.7 to 30.5 inches with an average size of 22.2 inches. Average sizes below Whiting and Stevens Point dams were 18.4 and 15.4, respectively. Anglers should target the Stevens Point Flowage and upriver for larger catfish and below Stevens Point Dam for higher catch rates.

Walleye were 11 percent of total catch with sizes ranging from 6 to 25 inches, and averaging 10.5 inches. Catch rates were highest below Stevens Point Dam (10.8 per hour), then below DuBay Dam (6 per hour), with catches about 3 per hour below Whiting, Rothschild, and Brokaw. This likely indicates good numbers coming from the 2004 year-class, throughout the river.

Lake Sturgeon restoration is continuing in the river, and in 2005 we stocked 10,000 fingerlings and 1,000 yearling sturgeon. We also initiated a population status survey using electrofishing in the reach below DuBay Dam. Three electrofishing boats worked in tandem for a total effort of 8.7 hours capturing nine lake sturgeon ranging in size from 26.9 to 36 inches. Anglers are reminded there is no open season for lake sturgeon on the Wisconsin River above Wisconsin Dells and sturgeon should be released immediately.

Portage County trout streams
Anglers on the Tomorrow River above Nelsonville will notice a lot in the way of habitat improvements. North of Nelsonville, improvements on a 4,300-foot reach of river on the Richard Hemp Fishery Area (County Road I access) were completed in summer 2005. Habitat crews worked to install nearly 850 feet of overhead structures, strategically place boulder retards and full logs in the channel, and cleaned and restored flow in eight spring entrances. Recent surveys on a habitat improvement project in this portion of the river indicated about 400 brook trout per mile and 1,200 brown trout per mile. We hope for similar numbers in this new reach once it stabilizes.

A second reach of the river below Amherst, at the old Highway 10 wayside park, had 2,200 feet of habitat constructed in summer 2005. This included creation of 10 wing walls using in-stream materials, installation of 16 lunker structures and eight skyhook covers, placement of 180 boulder retards, and digging two sediment traps. This project

decreased the average stream width from 63 feet to 43 feet and increased average depth from 1 ¼ feet to 3 feet. We recently stocked 30,000 fingerling brown trout from wild stock into the lower Tomorrow River. All were fin- clipped so that we can track the population in the coming years. The new habitat created in 2005 and a section completed at the Waupaca County line in 2003 should give the stocked and resident fish plenty of hiding places and hopefully enhance the population for the future. Anglers should exercise caution in all new habitat projects until becoming familiar with the changes.

Most major Portage County trout streams were surveyed in 2005. Even with low water levels the trout populations were in good health. Surveys on the Tomorrow River provided estimates of 924 brown trout per mile upstream from Nelsonville with about 20 percent within the harvest slot, set at 10 to 13 inches; and 1,699 per mile at Nelsonville with about 20 percent within the harvest slot and a few fish harvestable above 20 inches. The population level was similar to 2004's, but two to three times greater than the 500 per mile observed 10 years ago. Brook trout were estimated at 196 per mile upstream from Nelsonville and about 156 per mile at Nelsonville; few brook trout were captured within the harvest slot. Ten years ago the same areas held about 400 brook trout per mile. We surveyed three sections of Flume Creek in 2005 from below Rosholt to Northland and found that brook trout dominated the catch. On average there were 700 brook trout per mile with about 7 percent above the 9-inch minimum size. We also surveyed Emmons Creek upstream and downstream from Stratton Lake road and found an average of 2,700 brown trout per mile with 12 to 15 percent at or above the 9-inch minimum size. Whichever stream anglers favor in Portage County, I do not think they will be disappointed in 2006. - *Tom Meronek, fisheries biologist, Wausau*

Adams and Juneau counties

Petenwell and Castle Rock flowages

Central Wisconsin's inland seas, the Petenwell and Castle Rock flowages provide the most consistent and varied fishing opportunities in the area. Due to their immense size, (23,000 and 13,000 acres) and wide variety of habitats, these flowages are home to a great many species of fish. These flowages contain fishable populations of virtually all the game fish and panfish species known to Wisconsin except for the cold-water loving trout. There are also large populations of rough fish including carp and several species of suckers and redhorse. The rough fish provide an excellent forage base for the predatory game fish. One of the joys of fishing these waters is you are never sure of what you are going to catch.

White Bass **-** This past summer, we have seen a virtual explosion of young-of-the-year (YOY) white bass in both Petenwell and Castle Rock flowages. This is the strongest year-class in many years. The numbers of 4-to 5-inch white bass currently present are incredible. They are so dense they were a nuisance to anglers this past summer: they constantly robbed live bait off the hooks and catching a pair of white bass at the same time, on both the front and back hooks of a crank bait, was common. The white bass are currently providing excellent forage for the walleye and northern pike. The abundance of food may result in reduced catch rates of walleye and northern pike for the time being.

The fish will often have full stomachs and not aggressively search for food. The strong year-class will be good news to the angler fishing the “white bass runs” in May 2006 and 2007. Anglers should remember that white bass are listed on the PCB Fish Consumption Advisory, and should eat no more than one meal per month or 12 meals per year.

Freshwater Drum and Zebra Mussel - Recent newcomers to the Petenwell are the freshwater drum and the zebra mussel. Zebra mussels were first documented in the Petenwell in 2004. The zebra mussels found their way into the Petenwell by passing through the dams on Nepco Lake and/or Lake Arrowhead, (zebra mussels became established in Nepco in 2002 and Lake Arrowhead in 2004). So far, the Petenwell zebra mussels have not become extremely dense but they are a threat to the entire Wisconsin River system downstream of the Petenwell. Boaters are reminded to take precautions to avoid transferring the zebra mussels to new lakes. Once these invaders have been introduced to new water, there is nothing that can be done to control them. Freshwater drum, commonly known as sheephead, were first documented in the Petenwell in summer 2005, when anglers reported catching them for the first time. A strong year-class of drum hatched in 2005 and by late summer, the fish were averaging 5 inches. The freshwater drum is now firmly established in the Petenwell and can be expected to move downstream. Freshwater drum are common in the Mississippi and Winnebago systems and were likely introduced to the Petenwell via a minnow bucket. It is not known as to how abundant the drum will become or how they will interact with the other species of fish. Drum are known to eat zebra mussels but are not able to control the prolific zebra mussels to any significant degree. The recent introductions of the freshwater drum and zebra mussels to the Petenwell point out the impacts that boaters and anglers can have, and the importance of taking precautions to avoid introducing unwanted species.

Musky- In 2005, the minimum size limit for musky was raised from 34 to 45 inches for both Petenwell and Castle Rock flowages. This regulation change was widely supported by local anglers and organizations for the following reasons: Many people felt musky populations were not reaching their full potential; Petenwell and Castle Rock muskies have demonstrated the potential to grow exceptionally large if they are lucky enough to survive; and a huge forage base of rough fish provides unlimited amounts of food. Unfortunately, there is no natural reproduction of muskies so the population is 100 percent dependent upon the stocking efforts of DNR and private organizations. Muskies are very expensive to stock and the large acreage of these flowages makes it impossible to stock enough muskies to reach the biological carrying capacity. Netting surveys have resulted in .29 muskies per net, ranging in size from 11.7 to 47.1 inches. Thirty-six percent of the muskies were smaller than the previous 34-inch size limit and 64 percent were larger than 34-inch size limit.

The most revealing statistic was that under the old size limit, only 7 percent of the muskies surveyed reached a size of 45 inches. The new 45-inch size limit should result in many more muskies surviving to a quality size. Future surveys will be done to evaluate the effectiveness of the new rule. As time goes on, there should be increasingly more and larger muskies available.

Walleye- The walleye is the main target species for most anglers. The Wisconsin River is one of a few river systems in the state open to walleye fishing all year. Many anglers fish the spring walleye runs in March and April. The current slot regulation allows anglers to keep five walleyes per day between 15 and 20 inches with one over 28 inches. All walleyes between 20 and 28 inches must be immediately released.

The walleye population can be described as having excellent natural reproduction. Reproduction is relatively consistent year after year. Growth rates are excellent and exceed state wide averages. Netting surveys average 1.6 walleyes per net, ranging in size from 6 to 27.4 inches, with 58 percent of the walleyes captured under the 15-inch size limit and protected. Thirty-four percent of walleyes were in the harvest slot between 15 and 20 inches and 8 percent were between 20 and 28 inches and protected. Anglers should expect similar walleye fishing in 2006, with the possible expectation the huge white bass population may make it more difficult to catch walleyes. This condition may last until the white bass grow large enough that they are no longer suitable forage.

Lake Sturgeon **-** DNR continues efforts to re-establish a self-sustaining population of lake sturgeon throughout the Wisconsin River. Lake sturgeon are a very unique and ancient species that have been commercially overexploited worldwide because a female sturgeon can contain hundreds of dollars worth of eggs sold as caviar. Lake sturgeon have a very low reproductive rate because a female lake sturgeon does not spawn until she reaches 25 years of age and then only once every five years after reaching maturity. The last remaining sizable population of Wisconsin River lake sturgeon lives in Lake Wisconsin. These fish make an upstream spawning run in the spring and concentrate below the Wisconsin Dells Dam.

Re-establishing lake sturgeon has involved DNR fisheries crews annually electrofishing spawning sturgeon below the Wisconsin Dells Dam in the spring. The females are given a hormone injection to induce spawning and they are held in a tank with male sturgeon. After spawning in the tank, the adult sturgeon are released and the fertilized eggs are taken to DNR's Wild Rose State Fish Hatchery. The eggs are hatched and the young sturgeon are reared to fingerling stage. By fall, the fingerlings are tagged and distributed in the Wisconsin River system from the Brokaw Flowage downstream to the Stevens Point Flowage.

Tag returns have indicated that at least some of the young sturgeon have moved downstream through several dams and now make the Petenwell Flowage their home. Juvenile lake sturgeon are now being caught by anglers from the Petenwell; anglers are reminded that the sturgeon fishing season is closed on the Wisconsin River above the Wisconsin Dells Dam. Hopefully the day will come when lake sturgeon are again re-established throughout the Wisconsin River to the point where the population can support an open fishing season.

Adams County

Sherwood Lake

Sherwood Lake is a 246-acre flowage and is the middle lake in a chain of three collectively referred to as Tri Lakes. Electrofishing surveys were completed on May 22, 2000 and on April 17, 2002 and a comparison made of largemouth bass and walleye populations captured in the two surveys.

Largemouth bass **-** Largemouth bass are naturally reproducing at adequate levels to maintain the population, therefore stocking is not necessary. The 2002 survey captured 49 largemouth bass per hour of shocking. The bass ranged from 5.5 to 19 inches, with the average size 12 inches. The 2000 survey captured 44.4 largemouth bass per hour of shocking. They ranged from 4 to 20.4 inches with the average size 11.5 inches.

Walleye **-** Natural reproduction of walleye does not occur to any significant degree, therefore the walleye population depends upon stocking from DNR as well as the lake association. The 2002 survey captured 20 walleyes per hour of shocking. The walleyes ranged from 7.5 to 23 inches, with the average size 14.1 inches. The 2000 survey captured 21.3 walleyes per hour of shocking that ranged from 5.5 to 27 inches, with the average size 12.5 inches. – *Scot Ironside, fisheries biologist, Friendship*

Chippewa County

Otter Lake

In 1980, Otter Lake was chemically treated and two aeration systems were installed. These systems are operated and maintained through a joint effort between Chippewa County, the Otter Lake Booster Club, the Town of Colburn and DNR. A 2005 fish survey found high quality populations of largemouth bass, walleye and northern pike. The lake is well known for its bass fishing opportunities. Our survey found 34 percent of the bass catch greater than the 14-inch minimum size limit. The lake has a low density adult walleye population (0.7 fish per acre) that depends on stocking every other year. However, the quality of the walleye population is undoubtedly one of the best in the county: 80 percent of the walleyes over the 15-inch minimum size limit were 20 inches or larger. Female walleyes averaged 24.9 inches while males averaged 19.6 inches. The average age of walleyes captured was 9 years old. The oldest walleyes found were a 21-year-old male (24.4 inches) and a 20-year-old female (27.8 inches). Northern pike have a low density population (0.3 fish per acre) however their size structure is also exceptional. During the spawning run, 68 percent of our catch was 26 inches and larger and 41 percent was 30 inches and larger. Female northern pike averaged 31.4 inches while males averaged 22.5 inches.

Cornell Lake

A survey of the lake in 2005 between DNR and the Chippewa Valley Outdoor Resource Alliance documented a low-density remnant population of walleye. Most adult fish captured during the spawning run represented year-classes from the last two stockings of the lake, in 1992 and 1995. The survey showed some natural reproduction of walleye from 1996 to 2000, but spawning habitat in the lake is very limited. Size of the walleyes

was exceptional with females averaging 25.1 inches and males 20.1 inches. The average age of walleye captured was 10 years old. Before 1963, the lake had been stocked regularly with walleyes but has only been stocked sporadically since then. Based on the results of this survey, walleyes will once again be stocked every other year. In August 2005, 9,800 surplus fingerlings from our hatchery system were stocked in the lake.

Lake Hallie

In June 2005 a dedication was held for the opening of a handicapped-accessible shoreline fishing facility. This completes a 10-year effort to reconstruct the dam and improve access to a very popular family fishing lake between Chippewa Falls and Eau Claire. The Lake Hallie Lake Association, along with the Village of Lake Hallie and DNR, developed a 571-foot long shoreline fishing area complete with park benches, several accessible picnic tables and a small overhanging fishing pier for individuals who may have a difficult time casting. Handicapped-accessible parking and toilet facilities were already in place along with the handicapped-accessible boat ramp constructed in 1998.

Lake Wissota

With the installation of 26 log fish cribs in 2005, the Chippewa Rod and Gun Club has placed a total of 584 log cribs in the lake since 1981. For a flowage nearing its 90th year, these fish cribs provide valuable habitat where structure is lacking. In 2004, the club started to place half-log structures for smallmouth bass nesting, and in 2005 started their first rock reef installation. The club will continue to install fish cribs and will expand on their half-log and rock reef installations. With the elimination of annual winter drawdowns, aquatic vegetation populations are rebounding in the lake. Bluegills and other panfish species have responded well to this increase in habitat. A survey of the walleye population will be conducted in 2006 to evaluate the impact of the 14- to 18-inch protected slot size which was enacted in 1997. On a negative note, Eurasian water-milfoil was discovered in 2005. DNR stresses that boaters should remove all vegetation from their boats, motors and trailers before leaving the boat landing to prevent the spread of this exotic species to other area lakes.

McCann Creek

Habitat improvements to the creek were done in 2001 and 2002. Part of these improvements included working with private landowners and Trout Unlimited to address private road crossings which were raising water temperatures and acting as fish movement barriers. Three culverts, which when combined raised water levels about 8 feet, were replaced and lowered to alleviate any impounding effects. A survey conducted in 2005 showed that trout have responded positively. From 1996 to 2005, the density of trout decreased from 4,869 trout per mile to 2,538 trout per mile. There was a noticeable decrease in juvenile trout in 2005 which may have been caused by the summer drought. Despite this density decrease, biomass of trout improved from 111 pounds per mile to 166 pounds per mile and average weights of fish and size structure for larger fish have improved. Trout 8 inches and larger comprised 17 percent of fish 5 inches and larger in the 2005 survey, compared to 8 percent in the 1996 survey. McCann Creek has a minimum size limit of 8 inches and a daily bag limit of three.

Hay Creek
The stocking of brown trout in Hay Creek was eliminated in 1998 to protect and enhance a native brook trout population. A survey in 2004 showed that the population of brook trout has more than doubled from 211 per mile in 1995 to 542 per mile. Our 2004 survey found 27 percent of the catch was over the minimum size limit. Hay Creek has a minimum size limit of 8 inches and a daily bag limit of three. – *Joe Kurz, fisheries biologist, Chippewa Falls*

St. Croix, Pierce, Dunn and Pepin County trout streams
Inland trout fishing is extremely popular in western Wisconsin and 2006 is expected to bring another outstanding season. Historically, Pierce and southwest St. Croix counties have proven to be hot spots for both the early and regular trout seasons and this year will be no different. Some of the best trout streams in this area with high trout densities and excellent fishability include the Rush River, Kinnickinic River, Plum Creek, the lower Trimbelle River, Isabelle Creek, Cady Creek, Lost Creek, lower Elk Creek and the headwater sections of the South Fork of the Hay River. Annual monitoring of trout populations throughout the four-county area show natural reproduction of brook and brown trout to be down significantly in 2005, most likely due to lack of rainfall in fall of 2004 and late winter floods that imperiled emerging trout fry. Annual fluctuations in trout reproduction are common and are not a concern unless several years of weak reproduction occur in a row. Before 2005, trout reproduction has been excellent. Hence yearling and adult trout densities will remain in great shape for the 2006 season.

Rush and Kinnickinnic rivers
Fish surveys conducted during summer 2000 and 2005 show the Rush River to have phenomenal trout densities and excellent size structure. Brown trout densities (4 inches and larger) throughout the 25 miles of trout water averaged around 5,000 fish per mile. In prime locations, densities reached 8,000 fish per mile with 800 per mile over 12 inches. Growth rates, on the other hand, have slowed primarily due to colder water temperatures, reductions in coolwater forage fish and substantial gains in natural reproduction of brook and brown trout. Studies on the Rush are under way to determine whether brown trout stocking can be reduced or eliminated all together. Coldwater investigations on the Kinnickinnic River also show extremely high brown trout densities (5-8,000 per mile) throughout most of the 25 miles. The current regulation on the Kinnickinnic River is a 10- to 14-inch protected slot limit and a bag limit of five trout of which only one can be greater than 14 inches. Anglers are encouraged to harvest a limit of trout under 10 inches. During 2006-2007 field seasons, additional brook restoration work is planned for the South Fork of the Kinnickinnic River.

Cady Creek
Restoring native brook trout streams has been a high priority for the DNR. Just recently, our trout crew completed restoration of the lower three miles of Cady Creek in Pierce County. This wild brook trout stream had trout densities that averaged less than 500 trout per mile during the early 1990s. Today, several years after restoration, brook trout densities average 4,000 to 5,000 trout per mile. Over three miles of public fishing

easements are open to the public near Elmwood, Wisconsin. The brook trout size limit is 8 inches with a bag limit of three.

Gilbert Creek
In Dunn County, the headwaters of Gilbert Creek are currently being restored in cooperation with a number of local sporting organizations including Dunn County Fish & Game and Ojibleau Chapter of Trout Unlimited. So far, three instream habitat improvement projects on the North Fork of Gilbert Creek have been completed and several more projects are scheduled for completion during the next two years. Anglers are already enjoying stretches of the newly improved brook trout water, however, trout populations will need several more years to reach their full potential.

Tiffany Creek
Another brook trout stream restoration initiative began during spring of 2005 on the headwaters of Tiffany Creek in St. Croix County. This headwater stream was impounded, then ditched and suffered from severe bank erosion. Over ½-mile of stream was restored through the St. Croix County fairgrounds. We anticipate major improvements in trout reproduction and size distribution over the next several years. During 2006-2007 field seasons additional brook restoration work is planned for Tiffany Creek during the 2006-2007 field seasons. Pine Creek and the South Fork of the Kinnickinnic River.

Other trout streams
Several wild strain brown trout stocking initiatives were started over the last several years to improve trout populations. Progeny from wild strain brown trout were introduced into the Willow River and the Eau Galle River during 2003. Preliminary results from 2005 fish surveys on both the Eau Galle and Willow rivers show stock survival of wild strain trout to be excellent. Brown trout densities once around 200 to 300 per mile are now reaching modest densities of 1,500 to 2,500 per mile, with a surprisingly high number of heavy 15- to 20-inch fish present. In addition, changes in dam operation at the Spring Valley Dam were negotiated with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and have resulted in improved temperature regimes for trout survival. Instream habitat improvement to restore the channelized Eau Galle River in the Village of Spring Valley is nearly complete. Anglers may want to give the Willow River near New Richmond and the Eau Galle River near Spring Valley a try.

Due to budget cuts, stocking of legal-sized trout was discontinued on most waters throughout the state during the 2004 and 2005 seasons. With the recent increase in license fees, stocking of legal-sized trout will resume on many popular waters in this area including the South Fork of the Hay River near Boyceville, Lower Pine Creek near Ridgeland, Otter Creek near Wheeler, Bolen Creek near Connersville, Eighteen Mile Creek in Colfax, downstream segments of Wilson and Gilbert Creeks near Menomonie, Bear Creek near Durand, Arkansaw Creek in the Village of Arkansaw, the Apple River in Star Prairie and the Willow River upstream of New Richmond and in Willow River State Park near Hudson. Perch Lake, a two-story fishery just south of Somerset, will also be stocked.

St. Croix, Pierce, Dunn and Pepin County lakes

Area lakes can provide fast panfish action at ice-out, during spawning periods and early ice. Bass and Squaw Lake in St. Croix County are consistent producers. Lake Menomin in Dunn County and Nugget Lake in Pierce County have lower densities, but exceptional quality. Panfish populations can easily be over-harvested near large population centers where fishing pressure is high. Several years ago, we began a project to evaluate the effectiveness of a reduced panfish bag limit (25 to10) to improve the panfish size structure in Squaw Lake, St. Croix County and Thompson Lake, Pepin County. Fish surveys conducted in the spring 2005 show promising results on Squaw Lake where fishing pressure has historically reached 475 hours per acre. During 1996, bluegill electrofishing catch rates exceeded 70 fish per mile over 7 inches. By 2003, catch rates had declined to16 fish per mile over 7 inches. By 2005, one year after the regulation change, Squaw Lake electrofishing catch rates had increased to 37 bluegill per mile over 7 inches. These results are promising, but further fish surveys are needed to determine whether the reduced bag limit is working.

Last year anglers voted unanimously in favor of reducing the panfish bag limit on Tainter Lake and Lake Menomin in Dunn County. Anglers should be aware that this new regulation is scheduled to take effect during spring of 2006. Such action should help preserve the low density, but high quality bluegill fishery in Lake Menomin and help jump start panfish development in Tainter Lake.

Once every 50 years, DNR biologists have the opportunity to comment on relicensing of hydroelectric dams on area flowages. Recently, the hydroelectric dam on Tainter Lake was up for relicensing. Negotiations with Excel Energy led to the replacement of flashboards with a more effective rubber bladder dam. In the past, the flashboards would wash out during large floods, resulting in the lake level dropping 5 feet before the flashboards could be replaced. This often happened during peak spawning periods for panfish and bass. During fall 2005, Excel installed the rubber bladder system which will provide stable water levels in lake. We are optimistic that fishing activities will no longer be interrupted by fluctuating water levels and that sportfish populations will benefit from stable water levels beginning in 2006.

On another note, the New Richmond Flowage dam was repaired and refilled during 1997. We began restocking efforts in 1998. Today the 236-acre flowage is producing nice catches of largemouth bass, northern pike, perch and crappie. Hatfield Lake, also in New Richmond, suffered from poor oxygen levels during winter, which limited sportfish development. In cooperation with the city of New Richmond and the Willow River Rod & Gun Club the lake was rehabilitated by aeration and stocking in fall 2001. Jumbo perch action was hot during the winters of 2004 and 2005. We anticipate other species such as northern pike, bass and bluegill to pickup during the 2006.

Walleye assessments were conducted during the spring and fall of 2005 on several area lakes. We sampled 973 walleye in Lake Menomin which ranged up to 29 inches. The majority of fish were 12 to 16 inches long. Adult walleye population estimates of 2.4 per acre were similar to the 1999 survey of 2.6 per acre. Walleye reproduction on Cedar

Lake in St. Croix County remains well above state averages. Walleye fishing in 2006 will be fast at times, however the average walleye will be sub-legal.

In cooperation with Star Prairie Fish & Game and the Cedar Lake Rehabilitation & Management District, we are currently looking at options to improve the walleye size structure in Cedar Lake. Slot size limits or higher minimum size limits are being considered. These regulations will not affect the 2006 fishing season.

Anglers looking for shore fishing opportunities in this area may want to check out these locations: Willow River State Park near Hudson, Mary's Park in New Richmond, Homestead County Park on Perch Lake south of Somerset, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Eau Galle Recreation Area near Spring Valley, and Pine Point County Park near the Village of Eau Galle. A new fishing pier is scheduled to be installed in Glen Hills County Park near Glenwood City by mid-June. – *Marty Engel, fisheries biologist, Baldwin*

La Crosse, Vernon, Crawford and Monroe counties
2006 should be an excellent year for fishing in the inland waters around La Crosse. With more than 1,500 miles of rivers and streams, the four-county area is known for incredible trout fishing for both brook and browns. Recent improvements in land use, aggressive habitat restoration and a wild trout program have resulted in a trout fishery transformed from a "put and take" situation requiring heavy annual stocking into one in which most streams have self-sustaining wild trout populations. Since 1995, stream inventory surveys have resulted in the addition of more than 325 miles of new or upgraded water into the "Wisconsin Trout Streams" book. Another 50 miles will be added in 2006.

The regulation for most streams north of the La Crosse River is a 7-inch minimum size limit and a five fish bag limit. Most of these waters are lower fertility brook trout streams with good numbers of 8- to 10-inch brook trout and some nice browns. On some streams, fishing with flies or spinners is a challenge because of tag alder growth. Live bait is always a good option.

Most of the waters south of the La Crosse River have a 9-inch minimum size limit and a three fish bag limit. These are highly fertile streams with excellent numbers of brown trout and some brook trout. Both species are fast growing in these waters and several browns in the 20-plus inch range and brook trout 15 to 18 inches are caught in these streams each year.

Fishing with flies and spinners is much easier in these streams. Most are open pastures allowing for long back casts. The streams are crystal clear requiring a "stealthy" approach to prevent spooking wary browns. Neutral clothing, a low profile and polarized sunglasses are a must. Most anglers use hip boots or chest waders although there is ample shore fishing. Best fishing times are early morning and late evening on clear days and throughout the day on cloudy ones. After the sun "peeks" over the bluffs, trout feeding in the open can literally stop in minutes. Anglers must then look for shady areas for active fish. The best baits for fly anglers are scud, caddis and small mayfly imitations,

“muddlers”, streamers and crayfish patterns. Later in the season, “hopper” patterns are a good bet. For spin fishing anglers, small stickbaits, spinner baits, and crayfish pattern crankbaits are popular. Live bait is always effective, especially a single hooked nightcrawler weighted with a tiny split shot. Allow the crawler to drift naturally into overhead covers and snags and hang on!

There are 17 “Category 5” special regulation streams in the La Crosse area. Thirteen of these are “artificial lures only, catch and release” streams. Most of these are small brook trout streams; the rest, brown trout waters with good trophy trout potential. There are also four streams where harvest of smaller fish is encouraged by a higher bag limit of five trout, but the fish must be less than 12 inches. These streams are starting to provide some real quality fishing with many trout in the 12- to 15-inch range, good numbers of 16- to 19-inch fish and some real trophies in the 24-plus inch category. Check the 2006-2007 “Wisconsin Trout Fishing Regulations and Guide” for stream locations and details. Although there are more than 200 miles of public access provided by easements or state ownership, the majority of good water is surrounded by private land. While anglers have access to navigable waters through road “right of ways” and other public crossings, they must remain in the stream (feet wet) to remain legal. An easier approach is to stop and talk to the landowner. Most just want to know who’s on their land and will rarely deny access. It’s also a good opportunity to develop some new relationships.

There is also some excellent warm water fishing scattered throughout the four counties. The Black River has abundant smallmouth bass and walleyes as well as some trophy muskies. The lower La Crosse River has an excellent catfish population. A recent survey found flathead catfish up to 43 pounds and channel catfish in the 5- to 10-pound range. There are also smallmouth bass, walleyes and some very large northern pike. The Kickapoo and the upper La Crosse rivers are also home to some very large brown trout. Canoes or small flat bottom boats are the best way to access these rivers.

Several impoundments also have a good warm water fishery. The smaller ones (less than 60 acres) have some large bluegills, largemouth bass and crappies. Several of these smaller lakes are trolling motor only waters. Some of the larger ones (more than 100 acres) have walleyes, trophy northern pike as well as good sized panfish and largemouth bass. While most of the bigger lakes have public access, many cranberry flowages are privately owned and permission is needed.

Besides the abundant inland resource, anglers also can take advantage of the incredible opportunities the Mississippi River provides. Depending on the time of the year, outdoor enthusiasts can have multiple experiences. Morning turkey hunts, daytime fishing for panfish on the big river and then angling until dark for stream trout is an outdoor experience enjoyed by many who come to the La Crosse area. - *Dave Vetrano, fisheries supervisor, La Crosse*